Rural Sociology 59(4), 1994, pp 655–667

The Recent Revival of Widespread Population Growth in Nonmetropolitan Areas of the United States[1]

Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale*

Department of Sociology, Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60626 and *Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20005

ABSTRACT Population growth was widespread in nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas of the United States during the early 1990s. More than 64 percent of the 2,277 nonmetro counties gained population between 1990 and 1992, compared with only 45 percent in the 1980s. The nonmetro population still grew at a slower pace than did the metropolitan population, but the gap was much narrower than during the 1980s. Net migration gains accounted for 43 percent of the total estimated nonmetro population increase of 879,000 between 1990 and 1992. These findings suggest it is premature to conclude that the renewed population growth in nonmetro areas first noted in the 1970s has ended.

Introduction

This research note updates knowledge of nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) population redistribution trends by examining demographic shifts in such areas since the 1990 census. Such timely information is important because of the fluidity of nonmetro population shifts during the past 30 years (Long and DeAre 1988). After an extended period of slow nonmetro population gain through an excess of natural increase over migration loss, nonmetro demographic trends changed abruptly in the 1970s with the onset of the nonmetro population turnaround (Fuguitt et al. 1989). The widespread and substantial population gains in nonmetro areas during the 1970s were fueled primarily by net inmigration; natural increase contributed much less than it had in previous decades (Beale 1975; Fuguitt 1985; Johnson and Purdy 1980). Nonmetro population redistribution patterns shifted yet again in the 1980s. Most nonmetro counties lost populations during the 1980s and there was a modest net outflow of population (Johnson 1993b). In addition, the gain from natural increase in nonmetro areas continued to be small despite the most substantial natural increase nationally since the baby boom. Many researchers regarded the diminished nonmetro growth of the 1980s as evidence that U.S. population redistribution trends had reverted to historical form, with the turnaround of the 1970s just a short-

[1] This research has been supported by U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative Agreement 58-3 AEN-0-80065 and by U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative States Research Service Grant 92-37401-8283. Some of the data were obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Michael Maly and Greg Auguste provided assistance with data processing and maps.

term fluctuation. However, as data for the late 1980s began to accumulate, there was scattered evidence of another upturn in population growth rates in nonmetro areas (Beale and Fuguitt 1990). Our findings demonstrate that a significant upturn is, in fact, underway.

Data and procedure

Data on demographic change since 1990 are from the federal-state cooperative population estimates series developed jointly by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the states.[2] Additional data are from the U.S. decennial censuses of population for 1980 and 1990. Births and deaths for 1980 to 1990 are from special tabulations of the federal-state cooperative series. Net migration is calculated by subtracting natural change from population change during the appropriate time period.

Counties are the unit of analysis and are appropriate for this purpose because they have historically stable boundaries and are a basic unit for reporting fertility, mortality, and census data. New England county equivalents are included, as well as independent cities in Virginia and elsewhere. Alaska and Hawaii are excluded.

The latest (1993) metropolitan (metro) definition is used. The choice of which metro definition to use for classifying counties is far from trivial (Fuguitt et al. 1988; Johnson 1989). A net of 92 counties shifted from the nonmetro to metro category as a result of using the 1993 metro definition rather than the 1985 definition used during the 1980s (Johnson 1993b). Using the 1993 definition results in greater nonmetro losses during the 1980s and slower nonmetro growth during the early 1990s than would have been the case had the earlier metro definition been used.

Recent nonmetro demographic change

In a reversal of the trend of the 1980s, nonmetro areas of the United States experienced widespread population growth during the early 1990s. More than 64 percent of the 2,277 counties classified as nonmetro in 1993 gained population between 1990 and 1992 (Table 1). In all, 450 more nonmetro counties gained population than in the 1980s. The estimated nonmetro population gain between April 1990 and July 1992 was 879,000. In contrast, nonmetro areas grew by fewer than 1.2 million during the entire decade of the 1980s. The nonmetro population still grew at a slower pace (1.7 percent) than

[2] The estimation procedure used in 1992 to make the federal-state cooperative estimates differed from that used previously. During the 1980s, population estimates were based on a combination of the administrative records and ratio-correlation estimation procedures. In contrast, the 1992 estimates were based on the administrative records approach alone (Byerly 1994).

Table 1. Aggregate population change, net migration, and natural increase by adjacency and metropolitan status, 1980 to 1990 and 1990 to 1992

	N of cases	Initial population	Population change			Net migration			Natural increase		
			Absolute change	Percent change	Percent growing	Absolute change	Percent change	Percent growing	Absolute change	Percent change	Percent growing
1980 to 1990											
All nonmetropolitan	2,277	49,148,000	1,154,000	2.3	44.5	−1,452,000	−3.0	27.0	2,606,000	5.3	89.5
Nonadjacent	1,275	22,247,000	8,000	0.0	35.4	−1,234,000	−5.5	20.2	1,242,000	5.6	86.8
Adjacent	1,002	26,901,000	1,146,000	4.3	56.1	−218,000	−0.8	35.7	1,365,000	5.1	92.9
Metropolitan	834	176,028,000	20,722,000	11.8	80.9	6,592,000	3.7	57.7	14,129,000	8.0	97.7
Total	3,111	225,176,000	21,876,000	9.7	54.3	5,140,000	2.3	35.2	16,736,000	7.4	91.6
1990 to 1992											
All nonmetropolitan	2,277	50,303,000	879,000	1.7	64.2	377,000	0.7	51.2	502,000	1.0	80.3
Nonadjacent	1,275	22,255,000	317,000	1.4	55.8	99,000	0.4	44.0	218,000	1.0	74.7
Adjacent	1,002	28,048,000	562,000	2.0	74.8	278,000	1.0	60.3	284,000	1.0	87.4
Metropolitan	834	196,749,000	5,404,000	2.7	91.1	1,518,000	0.8	73.9	3,889,000	2.0	97.1
Total	3,111	247,052,000	6,283,000	2.5	71.4	1,895,000	0.8	57.2	4,391,000	1.8	84.8

Note: 1993 metropolitan status used for 1980 to 1990 and 1990 to 1992.

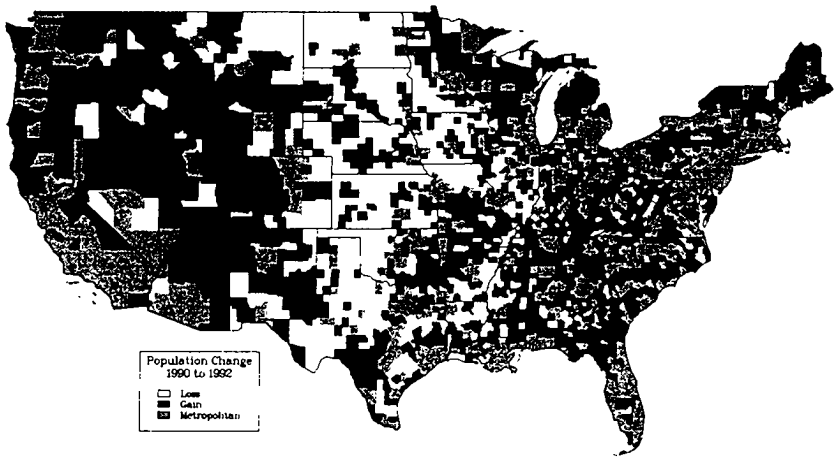

Figure 1. Nonmetropolitan population change, 1990 to 1992

did the metro population (2.7 percent) between 1990 and 1992, but the gap was much narrower than during the 1980s. Post-1990 population gains also were widespread geographically (Figure 1).[3]

Renewed nonmetro growth is due, in part, to a recent net inflow of migrants. In contrast, most nonmetro areas suffered a net outflow of population during the 1980s. Such migration gains accounted for 43 percent of the total estimated population increase between April

[3] These findings depend upon the quality of the 1992 federal-state population estimates. Accuracy of these estimates may be suspect because the estimation procedure employed in 1992 differed from that used throughout the 1980s and because they are only the second annual county estimates to use the 1990 census as a baseline. To obtain independent assessments of recent nonmetro demographic change, we asked each state demographer to provide the most recent county population estimates since 1990. Responses were received from 41 states. Many states rely exclusively on the federal-state estimates or make only minor modifications to them. However, 20 states produce independent county population estimates. In all, there are 1,111 nonmetro counties (49%) where both state-generated and federal-state estimates were available. In 76 percent of these counties, the finding of growth or decline since 1990 was consistent using the federal-state and state-generated estimate. Overall, the federal-state series indicates 62 percent of the nonmetro counties in these 20 states were growing, whereas 73 percent were growing according to the state estimates. Thus, the state estimates are consistent with the federal-state series in suggesting a marked upturn in the incidence of population growth in nonmetro America since 1990. Recent current population survey (CPS) data provide further evidence of an upturn in nonmetro growth rates. CPS data suggest that the substantial net outflow of migrants from nonmetro areas during most of the 1980s ended by 1990. After minimal net inflows during 1990–1991 and 1991–1992, there was a substantial influx of approximately 300,000 migrants to nonmetro areas between March of 1992 and March of 1993. Differences in metro definitions and time period preclude direct comparison of CPS and federal-state results. However, such CPS data substantiates the occurrence of renewed growth in the nonmetro population after 1990.

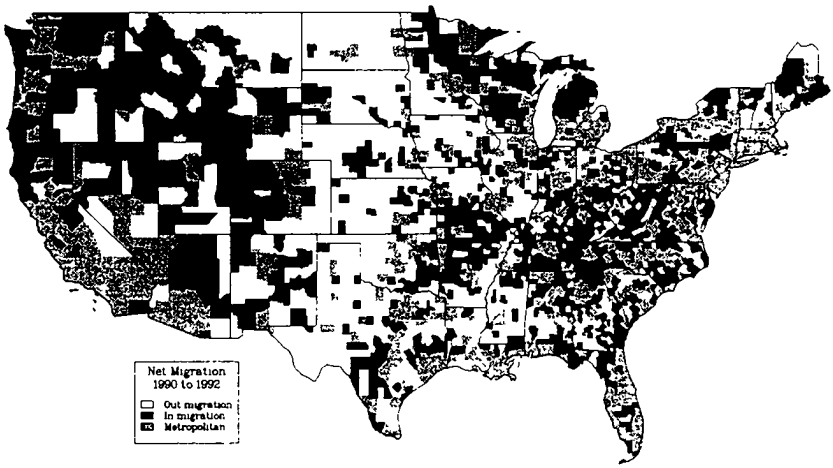

Figure 2. Nonmetropolitan net migration, 1990 to 1992

1990 and July 1992. Nonmetro areas had an estimated net inflow of 377,000 people during the period. This compares to a net outflow of 1,452,000 during the 1980s. The net migration percentage gain in nonmetro areas between 1990 and 1992 was only slightly smaller than that in metro areas. This is a sharp contrast to the pattern during the 1980s when metro areas had net inmigration of 3.7 percent, whereas nonmetro areas had a net outmigration of 3.0 percent. Such migration gains were widely distributed geographically though they were less prevalent in the Great Plains, West Texas, and the Mississippi Delta (Figure 2).

Natural increase accounted for 57 percent of the nonmetro population increase between April 1990 and July 1992. In all, births exceeded deaths by 502,000 in nonmetro areas. The annualized gain through natural increase in nonmetro areas was lower between 1990 and 1992 than it had been during the 1980s. In contrast, the annualized gain in metro areas was higher after 1990. In addition, the incidence of natural decrease was high in the early 1990s, continuing a trend first noted in the 1980s (Johnson 1993a; Johnson and Beale 1992). Between 1990 and 1992 an estimated 448 nonmetro counties experienced natural decrease (Figure 3).

Nonmetro population gains were more likely in counties near metro centers. Nearly 75 percent of these adjacent counties gained population in the early 1990s; 60 percent had net inmigration. In fact, the net migration gain in adjacent nonmetro counties (1.0 percent) exceeded that in metro areas (0.8 percent). However, even among more remote nonmetro counties, recent population gains were significantly greater than during the 1980s (Table 1). Such

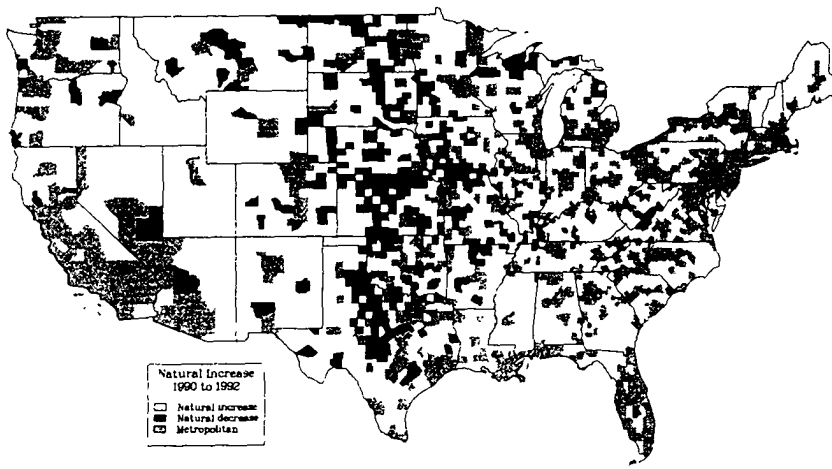

Figure 3. Nonmetropolitan natural increase, 1990 to 1992

nonadjacent counties had net inmigration during the early 1990s, compared with a significant net outflow in the 1980s. Nonmetro counties that were destinations for retirement-age migrants or centers of recreation[4] were the fastest growing counties during the early 1990s. Of the 443 nonmetro retirement destination counties, 87 percent gained population and 82 percent had net inmigration between 1990 and 1992 (Table 2). They are attracting retirees while retaining their existing population (Fuguitt and Heaton 1993). Population gains occurred in 88 percent of the 283 nonmetro recreational counties during the early 1990s and a sizeable majority (79 percent) received net inmigration. Such counties were prominent growth nodes during the 1970s and 1980s and this trend persisted

[4] Indicators of recreational activity are not easy to derive directly from available data; as a result, researchers have used a variety of proxies. The measure used here derives from analysis of a number of indicators of recreational activity. The first indicator was high per capita spending on hotels, motels, trailering parks, and camps. Many nonmetro counties with high per capita spending on lodging are in areas with many recreational opportunities. The second indicator of recreational counties was a composite measure requiring counties to rank high on two out of three measures: percentage of Census of Population employment in entertainment and recreation and in other personal services, the largest component of which is motels, hotels, and so on; percentage of incomes from earnings derived from amusement and recreation and hotels and other lodging places from the Bureau of Economic Analysis; and the percentage of housing units that were vacant and held for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. Any county ranking high on either of these measures (lodging spending per capita or the composite measure) was examined using published material regarding proximate tourist attractions, scenic areas, major parks, or other recreational nodes. Based on this empirical and contextual analysis, 283 counties were classified as recreational.

Table 2. Population change, net migration, and natural increase in nonmetropolitan counties by selected variables, 1990 to 1992

County type	N	Population change		Net migration		Natural increase	
		Percent change	Percent growing	Percent change	Percent growing	Percent change	Percent growing
Recreational	283	3.7	88	2.7	79	1.0	82
Retirement	443	3.6	87	2.7	82	0.9	76
Manufacturing	513	1.7	82	0.7	62	1.0	95
Government	323	2.3	74	0.7	60	1.6	85
Poverty	236	1.6	73	0.6	57	1.0	89
Mining	122	0.9	59	−0.1	44	1.1	86
Low density	387	1.1	41	−0.2	32	1.3	68
Farming	510	0.6	35	−0.2	28	0.8	63
Total nonmetropolitan	2,277	1.7	64	0.7	51	1.0	80

Notes: 1993 metropolitan definition; 14 previously metro counties excluded from type analysis. Types are not mutually exclusive. Recreational counties defined according to criteria outlined in text. Farm, manufacturing, mining, and government counties as of 1986 by Hady and Ross (1990). Retirement destination and poverty counties 1979 as defined by Hady and Ross (1990). Low-density counties had fewer than 6 persons per square mile in 1990. Percent change is aggregate change for all cases in category.

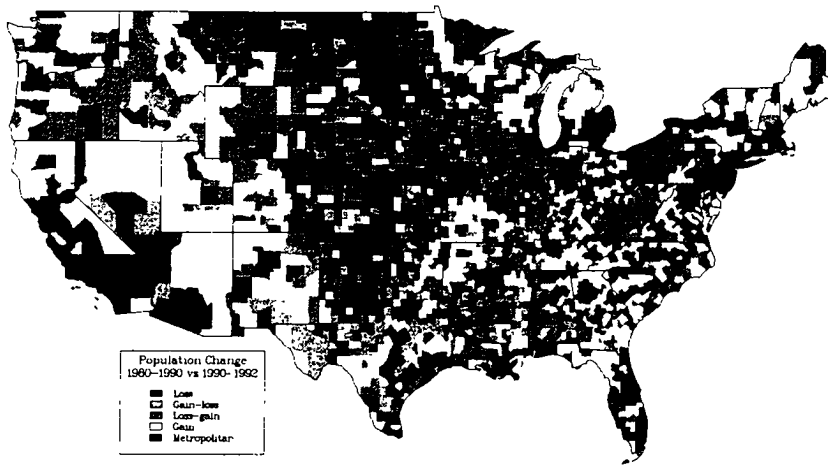

Figure 4. Nonmetropolitan population change 1980–1990 compared with 1990–1992

in the early 1990s. Nonmetro population gains also were fairly widespread in manufacturing, poverty, and government-dependent counties, though the gains were smaller than those in recreational and retirement counties. Growth in such counties was much more dependent on natural increase than net migration.

Counties dependent on farming and mining as well as those with low population density were the least likely to gain population during the early 1990s. Only 35 percent of the farming-dependent counties gained population and only 28 percent had net inmigration. The pattern of demographic change was quite similar in counties that were sparsely settled. Natural increase also was less common in farm dependent and low-density counties than elsewhere. Population gains were slightly more widespread in mining counties but the overall magnitude of the gains was quite small. The minimal population gains and widespread outmigration from mining and farming-dependent counties during the early 1990s represents a continuation of the trends of the 1980s. However, both the population and migration trends in such counties moderated during the early 1990s compared with the 1980s.

Comparing growth patterns in nonmetro areas in the 1980s with those during the 1990s underscores two important points. First, the renewal of nonmetro growth in the 1990s is widespread geographically. Counties shifting from loss in the 1980s to growth in the 1990s (loss-gain) are prevalent in all regions (Figure 4). Many are on the periphery of existing concentrations of counties that grew consistently through the 1980s and early 1990s (gain). Second, many counties that began to grow again in the 1990s after losing popu-

Table 3. Percentage of nonmetropolitan counties in selected population categories, 1960 to 1992

Population change 1980–1990 vs. 1990–1992	Number of cases	Population change 1960–1970 vs. 1970–1980			
		Percent loss both periods	Percent gain in 1960s loss in 1970s	Percent loss in 1960s gain in 1970s (turn around)	Percent gain both periods
Loss-loss	710	77.4	45.5	33.3	8.8
Gain-loss	98	3.2	14.5	4.8	4.0
Loss-gain	545	16.1	25.5	31.2	21.6
Gain-gain	882	3.4	14.5	30.8	65.6
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	2,235	411	55	863	906

Note: Data for counties that remained nonmetropolitan 1960 to 1992. Population change 1980–1990 compared to 1990–1992 as follows: loss-loss—lost population 1980–1990 and 1990–1992; gain-loss—gained population 1980–1990, lost population 1990–1992; loss-gain—lost population 1980–1990, gained population 1990–1992; gain-gain—gained population 1980–1990 and 1990–1992.

lation in the 1980s either had long prior histories of growth or participated in the nonmetro turnaround. This is illustrated by comparing population change in a given county during four periods (1960–1970, 1970–1980, 1980–1990, 1990–1992) (Table 3).

Researchers who believe the turnaround represented a short-term deviation from historical trends usually cite as evidence the renewed population decline in the 1980s in many turnaround counties—those that lost in the sixties but gained in the seventies. More than 64 percent (33.3 + 31.2) of these counties did, in fact, lose population during the 1980s. However, almost half shifted back to growth once more between 1990 and 1992. In all, 62 percent of the original turnaround counties were growing again in the early 1990s. Most counties (65.6 percent) that grew during both the 1960s and 1970s continued to do so in the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, most counties that grew during the 1960s and 1970s but declined during the 1980s also began to grow again in the early 1990s. Finally, a significant number (16.1%) of counties that lost population during the 1960s and 1970s and continued to do so during the 1980s began to grow after 1990. This raises important questions about the implications of the nonmetro population redistribution trends of the 1980s and early 1990s.

Discussion

It may be premature to argue that a new trend is underway based on the evidence of two years of population estimates benchmarked against a new census and using modified estimation techniques. However, the patterns suggested by these estimates and other col-

laborating evidence make it equally premature to write off the likelihood of renewed growth in nonmetro America. At the very least, these findings indicate it is too soon to conclude that the renewed growth first evident in the 1970s in nonmetro areas has ended.

Determining whether post-1990 nonmetro trends represent a continuation of the turnaround or a reversal to historical patterns is important to the ongoing development of theories to explain population redistribution trends. The turnaround and its aftermath stimulated significant theoretical work as researchers sought to account for the turnaround and then for the diminished growth in nonmetro areas during the 1980s. Frey and Speare (1992) identified three theoretical perspectives that each offer a partial explanation for the turnaround but predicted a somewhat different demographic pattern for nonmetro areas in the 1980s and beyond. Among these, the period effects perspective attributed the nonmetro turnaround to the unique economic and demographic circumstances of the 1970s. According to this explanation, a change in circumstances in the 1980s caused nonmetro demographic trends to revert to a pattern more consistent with historical trends. The regional restructuring perspective assumed the trends of the 1970s were due to deindustrialization. This perspective posited growth for areas serving as command and control centers and for those specializing in knowledge-based industries. It predicts unstable but generally diminishing growth prospects for most nonmetro areas. The deconcentration perspective predicts a long-term and gradual dispersal of the population into smaller, less densely settled agglomerations, due to the diminished importance of distance as a basis for spatial organization. This model suggests long-term growth for many nonmetro areas.

There is little agreement regarding which of these theoretical models, if any, fits the nonmetro population trends of recent decades (Lichter 1993; Wardwell 1988). Conclusions derived from such analysis depend heavily on the period considered. For example, Frey (1987) initially concluded that the deconcentration model fit the demographic trends of the 1970s and early 1980s best. However, after examining more recent data, he reversed himself, concluding that the nonmetro demographic trends of the 1980s are best explained by a combination of the regional restructuring and period effects models (Frey 1993). Other scholars remain doubtful. Lichter (1993) argues that speculation about the end of population deconcentration tendencies is clearly premature given the slowdown in the outflow of population from nonmetro areas during the late 1980s. This lack of consensus on a theoretical model to explain nonmetro demographic trends, together with the fluidity of recent population redistribution trends, underscore the importance of examining post-1990 data.

Our findings on the post-1990 period cast doubt on the argument that the turnaround of the 1970s was a function of unique demographic and economic period effects, whereas the redistributive patterns of the 1980s represent a reversion to more consistent historical patterns. The nonmetro demographic trends of the 1980s were neither a repeat of the nonmetro turnaround of the 1970s nor a reversion to the patterns of the 1950s. Rather, the trends of the 1980s straddled the patterns of the previous two decades (Johnson 1993b). It is possible that the trend of the 1980s represented the first stage of a reversion to the historical pattern of slow nonmetro growth through an excess of natural increase over net migration. However, given our findings, it appears more likely that the diminished nonmetro gains of the 1980s were just a pause—due to period effects—in the growth of nonmetro areas through the combination of net inmigration and natural increase that began during the 1970s. This pattern is consistent with the argument that nonmetro and metro areas have entered a period of equilibrium where short-term demographic shifts are acutely sensitive to period effects resulting from changes in the economic, political, and social climate (Wardwell 1977).

The protracted economic recession of the 1980s hurt nonmetro areas more severely than urban areas. Agricultural areas were hit hard by the long farm crisis of 1980–1986. In addition, nonmetro manufacturing—which employs many more nonmetro people than farming—came under increased competitive pressure from offshore firms during the 1980s with much loss of jobs (Elo and Beale 1988; Henry et al. 1986). All these factors contributed to the slower overall nonmetro growth in the 1980s. Only in the late 1980s, as the differential impact of these periodic factors began to subside, did nonmetro growth rates begin to rise again (Beale and Fuguitt 1990). The rate of nonmetro job growth has exceeded that in urban areas annually since 1988. As a result, nonmetro workers have had less economic reason to migrate to urban areas recently.

Speculation about future nonmetro population redistribution is perilous given the fluidity of the demographic shifts in nonmetro areas of the United States during the past several decades. This underscores the complexity of the forces causing population redistribution. Whatever the future course of nonmetro demographic trends, they are likely to be more volatile than in the past. Recent changes in nonmetro fertility rates and age structures are likely to diminish the substantial contribution that natural increase has traditionally made to nonmetro population gains. Thus, future nonmetro growth or decline is increasingly dependent on net migration. And, as the integration of nonmetro areas into the national economy continues, nonmetro migration trends are likely to become increasingly sensitive to national and global economic, political, and

social forces. Careful monitoring of future nonmetro demographic trends will contribute to the development of theoretical models to explain population redistribution and provide policy-makers with information they need to develop programs to meet the needs of the people and institutions of rural America.

References

Beale, C. L.
1975 The Revival of Population Growth in Nonmetropolitan America. ERS-605. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Beale, C. L., and G. V. Fuguitt
1990 "Decade of pessimistic nonmetro population trends ends on optimistic note." Rural Development Perspectives 6(3):14–18.

Byerly, Edwin R.
1994 Population Estimates for Counties and Metropolitan Areas: July 1, 1991. P25-1108. U.S. Bureau of the Census. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Elo, I. T., and C. L. Beale
1988 The decline in American counter-urbanization in the 1980s. Paper presented at the meeting of the Population Association of America. New Orleans, LA.

Frey, W. H.
1987 "Migration and depopulation of the metropolis: regional restructuring or rural renaissance?" American Sociological Review 52:240–57.
1993 "The new urban revival in the United States." Urban Studies 30:741–74.

Frey, W. H., and A. Speare
1992 "The revival of metropolitan growth in the United States: an assessment of findings from the 1990 census." Population and Development Review 18: 129–46.

Fuguitt, G. V.
1985 "The nonmetropolitan turnaround." Annual Review of Sociology 11:259–80.

Fuguitt, G. V., D. L. Brown, and C. L. Beale
1989 Rural and Small Town America. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Fuguitt, G. V., and T. B. Heaton
1993 The impact of migration on the nonmetropolitan population age structure, 1960–1990. Unpublished manuscript. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, Department of Sociology.

Fuguitt, G. V., T. B. Heaton, and D. L. Lichter
1988 "Monitoring the metropolitan process." Demography 25:115–28.

Hady, T. F., and P. J. Ross
1990 An Update: The Diverse Social and Economic Structure of Nonmetropolitan America. AGES9036. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Henry, M., M. Drabenstott, and L. Gibson
1986 "A changing rural America." Economic Review 71:23–41.

Johnson, K. M.
1989 "Recent population redistribution trends in nonmetropolitan America." Rural Sociology 54:301–26.
1993a "When deaths exceed births: natural decrease in the United States." International Regional Science Review 15:179–98.
1993b "Demographic change in nonmetropolitan America, 1980 to 1990." Rural Sociology 58:347–65.

Johnson, K. M., and C. L. Beale
1992 "Natural population decrease in the United States." Rural Development Perspectives 8(1):8–15.

Johnson, K. M., and R. L. Purdy
1980 "Recent nonmetropolitan population change in fifty year perspective." Demography 17:57–70.

Lichter, D. L.
1993 "Migration, population redistribution, and the new spatial inequality." Pp. 19–46 in D. Brown, D. Field, and J. Zuiches (eds.), The Demography of Rural Life. University Park, PA: Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.

Long, L., and D. DeAre
1988 "US population redistribution: a perspective on the nonmetropolitan turnaround." Population and Development Review 14:433–50.

Wardwell, J. M.
1977 "Equilibrium and change in nonmetropolitan growth." Rural Sociology 42: 156–79.
1988 Counter-urbanization in the United States: facts of the 1980s—theories of the 1970s. Paper presented at the meeting of the Population Association of America. New Orleans, LA.